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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child

Statement submitted by the European Women's Lobby, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Statement

The European Women's Lobby (EWL) welcomes the fact that the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in its 51st session will review implementation of policies and actions taken to address the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child. It also welcomes revision of the agreed conclusions reached at the 48th session[1] on the "Role of boys and men in achieving gender equality", as this is very relevant to the issue of achieving equality in the early stages of women's life cycle, namely in girlhood.

EWL firmly believes that equality between women and men begins with the girl child and recognition that the gender relations between girls and boys in the early stages of life is a precursor to gender equality in other phases of the life cycle. Girls and women of all ages are part of the same continuum; the difference for many girls and young women is their additional limited power to resist the constraints of gender inequality and correspondingly to negotiate the terms and conditions of gender equality in all areas of life.

EWL affirms that a proactive and systematic approach to gender equality in early childhood for both girls and boys, including the integration of a gender perspective in all policies related to children, is a prerequisite to eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child.

EWL has identified the following issues as critical in relation to the girl child in the European Union (EU), while recognising that they are also relevant and critical, some more so than others, in other areas of the world. Specific issues require urgent attention, namely, strong condemnation of all forms of male violence against the girl child in situations of conflict and war, and sanctions against those who in the role of the peacekeeper as part of the United Nations (UN) and EU peacekeeping mandates, engage in acts of violence against the girl child and women.

Education

EWL stresses that access to formal primary, secondary and third level education and the content of the curriculum as taught to girls and boys is a major influencing factor on gender differences and correspondingly on choices and access to rights. EWL points out that in the EU, while both girls and boys access to education in general may appear to be less problematic in comparison to other parts of the world, it should nevertheless be pointed out that girls and boys are not equal in accessing and fully availing of education systems and opportunities. In particular, access to girls from minorities, such as girls from the Roma community, asylum seekers, refugees and girls with disabilities remains highly problematic in some countries. The development of girl friendly school environments, education on gender awareness and encouraging girls to become leaders are essential to ensuring that the girl-child is central to formal education systems. Awareness raising and education of the girl child in relation to human rights instruments and capacity building to ensure full use of these are equally crucial.

Poverty and social exclusion

EWL draws attention to the impact of poverty and social exclusion on the girl child and young women, including in the European Union. In light of the persistent trend in the feminisation of poverty in the EU, the number of single parent households headed by women, the lack of political will to ensure payment of maintenance for girls – and boys – in situations

of separation and divorce, the weakening of public services and the impact on care, the demographic perspectives and access to education and training, EWL calls for systematic assessments on the impact of poverty/social exclusion on the girl child and to develop specific measures to address this in the context of European[ii] and United Nations policies, instruments and funding mechanisms on the rights of the child.

The impact of religious and customary practices on the girl child

EWL observes that a more conservative political climate over the past decade in Europe and globally has led to a growth in the influence of religion – all religions – in Europe. EWL recognises the threat religions play in refusing to question patriarchal cultures and in refusing to adopt positive measures in favour of the girl child and women. EWL's task is to continue to name, expose and condemn those practices that violate women's rights and silence women's voices wherever they may be. EWL refers to those areas in which cultural and religious practices and in some instances, legal practices, continue systematically to discriminate against women and the girl child either directly or indirectly."[iii] In this context, EWL refers to practices that directly target the girl-child, justified and attributed to religious and/or cultural beliefs, such as female genital mutilation (FGM). The girl child is particularly vulnerable given that, on the basis of her young age and external influence, she is not in a position to negotiate and subsequently, access to and enjoyment of her human rights are being curtailed in absence of support and legal action.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

EWL is concerned that young women are facing the highest risk of HIV infection through heterosexual contact.[iv] It is also concerned that practices that affect girls and young women's bodily integrity – such as FGM and forced sterilisation continue to persist. EWL calls for sexuality education, as opposed to simply sex education, as a means of accompanying girls and young women to guide them to decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, particularly as they approach and reach adolescence. EWL also calls for unconditional free access to all girls and women, irrespective of their legal status, to information, counselling, health care, and methods of contraception and abortion services[v].

Male violence against girls

EWL is very concerned about the risk of violence against the girl child in the family, particularly in situations of child custody in relation to separation and/or divorce and where there is a history of partner violence/domestic violence. This is particularly worrisome in countries where automatic shared child custody is becoming a standard practice. EWL calls for strong legal protection of the girl child in these situations.

EWL also stresses that the way in which the image of girls is constructed in public space lowers her social value and promotes violence towards girls. EWL calls for strict and precise legislative norms to regulate the use of girl-child images in public space, including the consequences of breaking the norms.

EWL is particularly concerned with trafficking in girls and young women for the purpose of sexual exploitation, prostitution, pornography and all other activities run by the commercial

sex industry and/or by traffickers and pimps. Prostitution and the growth in the sex industry are symptoms of the unequal power relations between women and men. In a flourishing market-driven economy, men are taking the absolute right to buy the bodies of girls and young women – and boys – as commodities. While measures have been taken in the EU[vi] to curb child sexual exploitation, failure to recognise the gendered dimension of trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation will undermine further measures to address and eradicate this extreme form of girls and women's human rights violation.

Therefore, EWL calls on the UN and the EU to introduce and implement binding measures within their institutional mechanisms to ensure that violence against the girl child, young women and women is addressed as an issue of gender (in)equality.

Non accompanied minors as asylum seekers – issues for girls and young women

EWL also identifies the special needs of the girl child and young women as a non-accompanied asylum seeking minor, for whom no specific measures are taken at European level. While non-accompanied minors form a special category and are named as such in European asylum policies[vii], the girl child/young woman is not named as such and this is a matter of grave concern. EWL believes that while both asylum seeking non-accompanied girls and boys have special needs, the non-accompanied girl child/young woman is highly vulnerable. The traumatic experience of undertaking a dangerous journey, alone and separated from families and communities make her vulnerable to sexual exploitation and prey to sophisticated organised criminal organisations. The experience of girls and women in refugee camps shows that minimum protection does not guarantee their security. Indeed, sources from the UNHCR[viii] testify to the vulnerability of women in refugee camp situations – in which they have presumably reached a zone of protection – they are coerced into providing sexual "favours" in return of food and other basic necessities. In the absence of specific measures for non-accompanied girls/young women asylum seekers, they are in fact at risk of finding themselves in these similar refugee-camp situations. EWL strongly condemns the detention of non-accompanied girls and boys and state that under no circumstances should they be detained for reasons of their immigration status.

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[i] Commission on the Status of Women, Forty-eighth session, 1-12 March 2004, "The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality, Agreed conclusions", 12 March 2004, as adopted

[ii] Notably in the context of the Commission of the European Communities, "Communication from the Commission, Towards an EU strategy on the Rights of the Child", Brussels 4.7.2006, COM(2006)367 final

[iii] Religion and Women's Human Rights - EWL Position paper, May 2006

[iv] See EuroHIV HIV/AIDS surveillance in Europe, End-year report 2005 No. 73

[v] CEDAW General Recommendation art.12 1999 – as cited in EWL's position paper on Women's sexual rights in Europe, January 2005

[vi] Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA of 22 December 2003 on combating the sexual exploitation of children and child pornography; Council Decision 2000/375/JHA of 29 May 2000 to combat child pornography on the Internet

[vii] Council Directive 2004/83/EC on *Minimum Standards for the qualification and status of third country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or as persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of the protection granted; Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003 laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers (article 19)*

[viii] See: UNHCR "Sexual and gender-based violence against refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons - Guidelines for prevention and response", May 2003